This issue of the ThinkUKnow e-newsletter will look at one of the recent developments in technology and the implications this may have on Australian youths. We will examine the online video chat application - Chat Roulette - and the appeal and risks it holds for young people.

Chat Roulette

Chat Roulette (www.chatroulette.com) is a website which pairs a user with a randomly selected video chat partner. It utilises webcams to provide a video, audio and text-based conversation between strangers. At any point during the chat, a user can select “next” and move onto the next random conversation partner.

This site was created in November last year by seventeen year old Andrey Ternovskiy from Moscow. His reason for developing the site was that he and his friends were bored with the chat options available to them at the time and wanted something new and exciting to use online.

There are an estimated 1.5 million users as of March 2010 and recent coverage in the media could lead to the user base expanding even further. Currently, the site requires users to be at least sixteen years old, however, there is no age verification process undertaken. A quick look at the videos uploaded onto YouTube of Chat Roulette conversations clearly shows that children under sixteen are using this service.

Unfortunately, there are a number of people who use Chat Roulette to behave inappropriately. A number of users have complained of exposure to nudity, pornography, offensive language, racism and other inappropriate behaviour. Users can report these to the administrators and if three people complain about the same user within five minutes, that user is then banned from the service for 10-40 minutes.

There are a number of sites which have emerged alongside Chat Roulette. These include www.chatroulettemap.com which plots the current users of Chat Roulette based on IP addresses. Other sites have emerged as a repository of Chat Roulette moments, for example, www.chatroulettevideos.com and www.bestofchatroulette.net.

Time2Talk

This section provides some useful conversation starters for talking with young people about their use of technology.

Do you use a webcam?

Who do you speak to over a webcam?

Has anyone ever made you feel uncomfortable on a webcam?

Has anyone ever asked you to do something on a webcam which made you feel uncomfortable?

Who would you speak to if something happened to you on a webcam which was upsetting?

Advice for parents, carers and teachers

- Talk to the young people in your care about the risks involved with Chat Roulette and why there are age restrictions in place
- Discourage children under the age of sixteen from using Chat Roulette
- With young children, you may wish to disable the webcam software on the computer so that it cannot be utilised without your supervision. Refer to the guide for the specific laptop, PC or webcam which you own
- Discuss appropriate people to speak to if a young person comes across something which makes them feel uncomfortable online, eg their parents, teachers, trusted relatives, Youth Beyond Blue etc.

Maintaining the lines of communication with the young people in your care will help you to stay abreast of what they are up to online, and assist you in providing guidance on how they can utilise the internet and associated technologies safely.